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SUBJECT: PAYA: IT'S TIME FOR U.S.-CUBA DIALOGUE

REF: HAVANA 23578

Classified By: COM Michael E. Parmly for Reason 1.4(d).

¶1. (C) Summary: Leading Cuban pro-democracy activist Oswaldo Paya told COM on December 13 that the time has come for the United States and Cuba to hold talks in order to "change the atmosphere" in bilateral relations. Paya said the Cuban Government has for decades succeeded at making the United States the repository for all blame, as well as the perceived source of all Cuban suffering. Only through direct discussions, he said, could the United States "stop making itself the point." COM Parmly doubted any goodwill behind Raul Castro's recent half-hearted offer for dialogue, and asked why the Cuban people aren't allowed to define the issues. Paya also acknowledged that intense GOC harassment is continuing against Cuban activists. End Summary.

¶2. (C) Paya, the Varela Project founder and head of the Christian Liberation Movement (MCL), told COM Parmly that it's time for an "earth-moving event": talks between the U.S. and Cuban Governments. By sitting down at the same table, he indicated, the USG would largely deny the regime its ability to blame the boogie-man United States for each and every problem Cubans face. During a relaxed, 90-minute conversation at his home, Paya said any such talks would necessarily be basic at first, adding, "It's not as if you'd be discussing property indemnifications right off the bat." Paya said the first objective would simply be to open a channel of communication, not to immediately overhaul bilateral relations. Once a dialogue has been established, he said, the USG should "tell the Cuban Government what it doesn't want to hear:" that democratic change is needed.

¶3. (C) COM Parmly asked why the Cuban people aren't being allowed to define the issues. He also indicated that he doubts Raul Castro was acting in good faith when he held out the offer, on December 2, of dialogue between the two countries. (Note: On December 5, Paya told us he doubted the goodwill of Raul's offer. End Note.) COM pointed out that U.S. legislation specifically proscribes negotiation with either of the Castro brothers.

¶4. (C) Paya acknowledged that high-level repression continues against MCL and other pro-democracy activists. He said that over the preceding seven days, State Security officials had detained a number of people who visited or were trying to visit his house. Elsewhere, he said, MCL members were detained for passing out copies of "So Cuba Can Live Free," an MCL statement (reftel) calling on the Cuban Government to enshrine a number of basic freedoms. Paya also expressed concern for his well-being. "People aren't taking seriously enough the threat that they'd liquidate me" in the event of Fidel Castro's death.

COMMENT

15. (C) Paya is correct in viewing anti-Americanism as one of the key pillars of the regime's ideology. We do not agree with him, however, that talks with Cuban officials would either halt the U.S.-bashing or, more importantly, benefit the Cuban people. The question of US-Cuba negotiations misses the point that Cuba's future is best determined by Cubans. Paya insisted on that very point when we briefed him on CAFC-II. We took Paya's appeal as a reflection of the intense pressure he and his people are under. The importance of letting Cubans craft their own future, in our view, trumps Paya's call for an escape valve-type gesture, and we told him as much.

16. (C) It is unclear whether Paya will meet with the visiting Congressmen. He said that if he did, he would tell them it would be an outrage to lift the embargo without significant action by the GOC, such as the release of all political prisoners. That said, Paya's willingness to contemplate direct US-Cuba talks could feed into a misinterpretation of his real views.

PARMLY